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Defectors damage the KGB

The recent rash of arrests and convictions for espionage in the United States show how active the KGB and Soviet military intelligence have been in bribing low-level Americans to reveal highly classified technical information.

By contrast, only the defection from the KGB of Vitaly Yurchenko has received much press attention in the United States, because of his dramatic redefection back to Russia. But according to top American intelligence officers, at least nine high-ranking KGB officials have defected to the West in the last two years.

When one thinks of the disorganization and mutual distrust that the defection of one Kim Philby caused in the ranks of British intelligence, it is hard to overestimate the damage done to the KGB by the defection of so many of their best and brightest officers in so brief a time.

The American naval codes and anti-submarine techniques revealed to the Russians by the John Walker spy network can be specifically identified and effectively replaced. But how is the KGB hierarchy in Moscow going to cope with the widening, cumulative, and not clearly identifiable destruction of secret sources and methods caused by the sequential flight to freedom of its most promising career officers?

For example, in the case of the defection last September of Oleg Gordievski, the chief of the KGB residency in London, the counterintelligence experts at No. 2 Dzerzhinsky Square must assume because of his position that Mr. Gordievski had complete knowledge of all Soviet-bloc agents and operations in the United Kingdom and passed this on to British and American intelligence. KGB headquarters must still be painfully compiling the damage assessment and reassigning to domestic duties trained officers and agents who can never again be risked in foreign assignments.

Just how seriously the Soviets take the defection of one of their high-ranking KGB officers is indicated by new information that has come to light in the Yurchenko case.

After a systematic review of all the highly valuable information revealed by Mr. Yurchenko during his debriefing in Washington, the U.S. intelligence community came to a nearly unanimous conclusion that he was initially a genuine defector and only later decided to redefect.

There is now ominous confirmation from the Soviet side that this verdict is correct. When a recent Western press report claimed that Mr. Yurchenko had been executed, his Soviet jailers arranged a chance meeting for him with a Western TV crew, and a brief interview was used to establish that he was still alive.

However, Reagan officials state that medical analysis of Mr. Yurchenko's appearance on this TV tape clearly reveals his exposure to severe torture. His ears appeared to be deformed and his face bruised and bloated. If this professional medical judgment turns out to be correct, the Soviets may only have succeeded in ensuring that no Russian defector will ever redefect again.

In the separate foreign countries in which the KGB defectors served, Moscow has no choice but to undertake the slow and laborious process of rebuilding its agent networks. Within Russia itself, security procedures can be made ever tougher and compartmentation of information more strict, at the cost of impaired efficiency. Reliable reporting indicates that KGB training courses are emphasizing the dangers and difficulties of attempted defection.

But the basic problem the KGB faces is bigger than these procedural responses would imply. There is a wide consensus among veteran observers of Soviet intelligence that the root cause of the increasing number of defections among the more able of its career officials is the loss of faith in the ideology, the stagnation of the economy, and the decay of the system.

As a result of exposure to the reality of life in the West in the course of their foreign assignments, KGB officers are able to judge for themselves the accuracy of Soviet propaganda. A recent Soviet defector goes so far as to suggest that as many as 5 percent of KGB career officers are so alienated that they might defect, if given an opportunity.

None of this evidence can be taken to mean that the hugely privileged and heavily armed Soviet bureaucracy is about to come apart at the seams. For all his talk of the need for reform, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev has carefully kept intact the basic privileges enjoyed by the *nomenklatura* at the top of the Soviet bureaucracy.

But for the intelligence agencies of the West, the current defections from the KGB are a sign that this organization is no longer the monolithic and impenetrable entity it was once thought to be.

For those who look forward to the day when the long-suffering Russian people can enjoy a wider degree of freedom, this can only be good news.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.